

The Vine Guy » **Scott Greenberg**

First-rate first-date wines to savor

With Valentine's Day quickly becoming a distant memory, I thought I would share an experience that provides an interesting juxtaposition to the day devoted to couples who already have the luxury of enjoying a romantic relationship.

My wife and I were recently at a dinner party with some new friends, when the topic of wine came up. The conversation centered around the wine experiences that each couple had enjoyed over the past several years. As the stories became more elaborate, so did the quality of the wines mentioned, with price tags entering the triple-digit neighborhood. However, at one point, their son Patrick spoke up and brought the conversation to a screeching halt with the following question: "What's a good 'first date' wine?"

I was so stunned by the simplicity of the question that I asked him, a 21-year-old college student, for clarification. "Let's say that I want to invite a young lady over for dinner," he explained, "and I want to impress her with a good bottle of wine, but I'm on a tight budget so I don't want to spend a lot of money in case, you know, it doesn't work out."

It is certainly a legitimate question. And to be totally fair, the proverbial door swings both ways and applies to any single woman who wants to find a wine that fits the same bill.

The question also goes as deep on the palate as it does light on the wallet. The wines should not only be reasonably priced (read "inexpensive"), but they need to be versatile enough to appeal to a broad range of tastes. And good enough to secure a second date. Retail prices are approximate.

Personally, I can't think of a better way to kick off any get-together, be it a party with friends or an intimate night of potential romance, than with a sparkling wine. The nonvintage **Pascual Toso Sparkling Brut** from Argentina (\$10) is both festive and inexpensive. Over the past decade, Argentina has emerged as one of the most diverse wine-producing



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countries in the world, making affordable wines based on both Old and New World techniques. This chardonnay-based sparkling wine sports citrusy aromas on the nose and bright flavors in the mouth. The attention-getting finish is smooth and velvety, with enough acidity to make pairings with grilled seafood or sushi a perfect match.

French wines always make a great first impression, and French rose wines are particularly memorable. The **2009 Chateau de Segries Tavel Rose** (\$15) from the Rhone Valley is a reliable wine for first dates, thanks to the combination of traditional varietals grenache, cinsault, clairette and syrah. The fragrant aroma of strawberry, black cherry and violets

is charming. Dark strawberry and cassis flavors attack the front of the palate while notes of raspberry and cherry bring up the rear. There is a hint of white pepper on the savory finish, which makes it an ideal wine to pair with either roasted chicken or soft cheeses.

When I first began dating, one of the few things I knew how to cook was pasta and tomato sauce. Of course, my culinary skills have improved along the way, but I wish the **2007 Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Castegiocondo Campo ai Sassi Rosso di Montalcino** (\$15) from Tuscany was around when I was first getting started. This one sangiovese wine is bursting with fragrances of dried herbs and cherry fruit. The balanced mouthfeel features red plum and cherry flavors up front and a touch of tobacco and leather on the medium-bodied finish. A red pasta sauce will definitely benefit from this wine.

If you want to step up the impress-o-meter, try pairing the **2008 Red Car Boxcar Syrah** (\$23) from the Sonoma Coast of California with a rack of lamb. This nicely weighted wine sits in the mouth and provides layered flavors of black fruit, dark cherries and dried spices. Notes of blueberry liqueur and pepper find their way to the back of the palate and onto the lengthy finish.

BEST GALLERIES

1 David Smith Invents: In his first D.C. exhibition in 25 years, sculptor Smith interpolates techniques from drawing and painting with unconventional and unforgettable results.
Where: The Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW
When: Through May 15
Info: \$12, \$10 seniors and students, free for 18 and younger.;202-387-2151; phillipscollection.org



2 Dafna Kaffeman: What Could Be Sweeter Than Going to Paradise?: Kaffeman renders plants and insects native to Israel life-size in glass, then places them on handkerchiefs embroidered with the words

of would-be suicide bombers.
Where: The American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW
When: Through March 13
Info: Free; 202-885-1300; american.edu/cas/katzen/museum

3 Works by Magda Watts and Malcah Zeldis: A fine companion piece to the Kaffeman exhibit. Israeli dollmaker and Holocaust survivor Watts and folk artist Zeldis bring their haunting, world-weary visions to these vignettes of Jewish life in the shtetl.
Where: Luther W. Brady Art Gallery, Media and Public Affairs Building, second floor, 805 21st St. NW
When: Through Feb. 25
Info: Free; 202-994-1525

-Chris Klimek

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